

# Retaining the Warrior's Edge: Preventing another Task Force Smith

by

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The armed forces of the United States have long wielded advantages in technology, equipment, quality of training, and the education of our leaders. After ten years of combat, one additional discriminator enhances our collective military pedigree; the most experienced combat force in the world. America's armed forces truly possess a warrior's advantage. This advantage or edge comes at a high price in terms of blood and national treasure. We should consider combat experience gained through personal hardship and national sacrifice a national asset; one to be husbanded and protected. Historically, the United States Government, to include the Department of Defense, has done little to conserve combat experienced military members and leaders during post-conflict reductions, allowing hard-earned capabilities to diminish in the name of cost savings. The writing is on the wall: force and funding reductions are coming, and soon. Now is the time to think, plan and act to preserve this most important of all resources – the warrior's edge.

It is difficult to begin thinking about downsizing the force while still engaged in a global war, but we must do so if we are to avoid mistakes of the past. Four considerations come to mind, and we offer them as an initial framework to think about retaining an experienced force:

- **How we downsize:** Having been through multiple force reduction efforts, the process always appeared to be arbitrary and haphazard. No one will want to reduce headquarters or the number of flag billets, but we must consider higher level organizations as we plan to downsize. It is better to lose headquarters than hollow out lower level units and formations. Fewer units, fully manned, adequately equipped and properly trained are the future building blocks for expansion. One historical



Task Force Smith arrives in Korea, July 1950

example of a poorly planned draw-down is Task Force Smith,<sup>1</sup> the ill-fated unit thrown into action just north of Osan Korea in July of 1950. This unit was under-manned and improperly trained for its given mission to slow the onslaught of North Korean regiments. Task Force Smith is often used as a symbol of military unpreparedness – “no more Task Force Smiths.”<sup>2</sup> Task Force Smith highlighted the initial unpreparedness of U.S. ground forces in Korean conflict.

- **Who we promote and what we value:** We must not fall into “business as usual” when it comes to promotions. Our track record has been to convince ourselves that we must be “fair.” We will say things like “after all it is not their fault they were not deployed.” Fault or not, if all things are equal, we must give the nod to combat experience. If combat experience is valued, then make it valued by promoting those with good combat records.
- **What we fund:** We must resist the tendency to exclusively focus on big dollar programs and new systems. While these are important, we must also balance our efforts to maintain a good quality of life for families and even consider incentive awards or bonuses directly related to retaining quality service members possessing real combat experience.
- **How we employ U.S. forces:** We must conduct an honest assessment of the current and potential future threats and compare these threats with our vital national interests; tailoring force structure to counter these threats. Prudence is a virtue when downsizing; future deployments must avoid frivolous use of scarce resources and unnecessarily long and protracted occupations.



South Korean Memorial to Task Force Smith

Thus far most reductions have targeted select populations and systems, but the day of reckoning where large reductions will occur is rapidly approaching. We must begin thinking and planning to reduce the force in such a way as to retain hard earned combat experiences. We should consider temperance in our future military employments, as well as, the consequences of protracted engagements. The military pledge to the nation and the people of the United States must be – we will keep the best people, with the most experience, for as long as possible; simply put “No more Task Force Smiths.”

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<sup>1</sup> There were combat veterans, who served in World War II in Task Force Smith, but the Task Force was not fully manned, they were ill-equipped and poorly trained.

<sup>2</sup> Gen. Gordon Sullivan, Chief of Staff, United States Army, used the phrase "No more Task Force Smiths" as a metaphor to conjure images of a broken Army with the intent of preventing and repairing a hollow force.